

Naughty or nice

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Summary: It's Christmas Eve, and Cassie Hack and Vlad have a slasher-Santa to take care of. Memories of past holidays and the difficulties of the current one combine to make this one scary/merry Christmas.

1. Chapter 1

Naughty and nice

Author notes: I do not own these characters.

"THIRD CHILD HOMICIDE VICTIM IN AS MANY DAYS," read the headline of the morning paper, and Cassie Hack raised an eyebrow, having expected something of the like from the look in Vlad's eyes when he handed it to her. She had to be the only 22-year-old she knew who read the paper religiously, with a special attention devoted to any particularly gory deaths. But then again, she was also pretty much the ONLY 22-year-old she knew. Sort of a side effect of spending more time saving people from becoming part of an undead serial killer's bloodbath than actually, well, spending time with people.

The article's details were as vague as always. Three kids between the ages of 6 and 10, found with clothes ripped and bodies "mutilated" outside the local Henderson Shopping Mall. The only interesting tidbit that was included within its content was that beside each child, each time, there had been a small candy cane and a jingle bell, as though from an elf hat.

Figures. After all, it was the day before Christmas.

There was no speculation within the article as to who may have been committing the murders or how the children might have been, nor were the backgrounds of the children, their parents, or even the times of day they were estimated to have died or gone missing. Damn journalists and their tendency to make her do all the actual

investigative work herself, with only the barest outline of information she and Vlad would need to get started. But then again, what better did Cassie have to do with her time than point herself and Vlad in the direction of what looked like another case of a slasher to kill- or more accurately, re-kill?

"Hurrâ€¢do you think it is one of them, Cassandra?" asked Vlad, his oversized, lumpy brow creasing slightly as he looked down at his considerably smaller friend, and Cassie shrugged, yawning behind one black-polished hand and shaking equally dark strands of hair from her eyes before replying.

"Well if it isn't, either one this is one asshole who needs to find his face meeting the end of my baseball bat. Too bad we can't run over him with a sleigh, it would be more in keepings with the season."

Whether or not she ever admitted as much aloud to Vlad, Cassie was relieved to have a new case on her hands. In her mind it was not an inconvenient interruption to a happy holiday, but rather a welcome distraction, a chance to give herself something to focus on other than the unpleasant reality of what holidays now were to her. The approach of the most commercialized time of the year didn't give her any increased sense of peace and hope and joy, and as for good will towards men, it was all Cassie could do to keep from taking out some of the people she encountered who WEREN'T resurrected evil. For a jaded Goth girl whose only family and friend remaining happened to be a 7 foot man so deformed he had to wear masks when he went out in public to hide his misshapen head and twisted features, the only way to get through the holiday season was to deny her way through it.

It hadn't always been this way, of course. When she was a kid, Cassie had looked forward to Christmas as the one time of the year where magic could happen and all her hopes and dreams could come true. Each Christmas she had prayed to the God her mother insisted was real and out there and loving her as his special creation so, so much, not only for whatever toy it was that was the it possession of that particular year, but for her mother's happiness and continued ability to find enough work to pay the rent and support them both, however thinly she might squeak by with it. Cassie had prayed to be prettier and smarter so all the other kids in her school would like her, and failing that, she had prayed that God would let her have just one real friend.

God had always shot down each request, every single one of them, and on Christmas morning Cassie had always awakened to her Delilah Hack's attempt to make a festive Christmas morning, with the almost dead Christmas tree she had managed to haggle down the price of, adorned with Cassie's pathetic paper ornaments created in her first or second or third grade classroom, the lights that only lit up on one side of the string. Her mother never managed to save up enough to buy whatever it was that Cassie really wanted, and she could not, of course, deliver to her the non-material things she wished for, the ones that even God denied her.

"It doesn't matter, baby, what we get or what we got, just as long as we got each other," Delilah had said to her with a sad sort of hope in her eyes, as her big arms wrapped around Cassie's scrawny shoulders, one meaty hand resting against her daughter's shaggy head. "That's all we ever need, isn't it?"

Cassie had always agreed, not wanting to hurt or upset her mother when she was trying so hard. But if what she had said was true, then that meant that now, her holidays were truly screwed. That was what tended to happen when your mother murdered the children who harassed you at school before committing suicide, then arose from the grave as an undead slasher, picking up exactly where she had left off. That sort of thing tended to mean getting together as a family for the holidays wasn't in the cards.

Especially when you were the one that had to kill her again.

It was after this second death of her mother that Cassie had committed to seeking out and finding those like Delilah, the resurrected undead who just couldn't seem to keep themselves from popping up again to resume mass murder. She had no supernatural abilities, no powers beyond her knowledge of fighting, a powerful swing, and her own intellect, nothing to defend herself with beyond her baseball bat, whatever guns she could get her hand on, and her seven foot, almost rock-solid companion Vlad, who protected her with the single-minded fierce loyalty of a brother safeguarding his sister- or maybe of a father shielding his child. Vlad, abandoned as an infant and raised by a kindhearted butcher apart from the world and possible cruelty of others until the butcher's death, was what she had now, the only person standing in the way of Cassie's falling into total solitude.

She had no real powers to fight against what she had dubbed the slashers, beyond those of her rapidly increasing experience. What she did have was motivation, a mission. Sometimes, Cassie thought it seemed to be a destiny, or maybe just a sentencing.

Whatever it was, there seemed to be only so many times you could lose or be left by someone you cared about, only so many times you could rip a slasher's head off before you lost the capacity for holiday joy.

2. Chapter 2

"Yep, I'm just hanging around outside the mall with my baseball bat and my seven foot tall, three foot wide pal, yeah, that isn't suspicious at all," Cassie muttered, rolling heavily mascaraed eyes as she slumped against the wall of the mall's back end, exhaling. "Why don't we start juggling or riding a unicycle too, just to make sure we're really inconspicuous?"

"Hurrâ€|I do not know how to juggle, Cassandra," Vlad mused, one hand scratching at his ear as he appeared to take her flippant statement seriously. "And I do not know what a unicycle is."

"If you tried to ride one it would crack into a thousand pieces, so I guess that option's out," Cassie informed him. She shivered, pulling her thin jacket more closely around herself in order to preserve what little warmth it provided. It might be December, but her wardrobe still had to reflect that she was on a slasher search, which automatically meant she had to wear short skirts and low cut corsets, just in case it gave her the edge by distracting the said slasher with whatever sex appeal she could conjure up. It might be good bait, looking like a skanky would-be victim, but it also meant that she was

freezing her ass off, standing out here waiting.

"Do you think this is where he will come?" Vlad asked, eyeing her bare legs not with lust or pleasure, as most men would, but rather with concern, as though he too were thinking that she must be cold. Only Vlad, sweet, practically sexless Vlad would worry about her comfort when Cassie was wearing both her shortest skirt AND fishnets.

"This is where they found the other kids, if he doesn't bring them here to kill them he'll bring them here to dump them. Either way, slasher sightingâ€œ only thing is if he takes off for Christmas Eve. But something tells me the guy who leaves jingle bells and candy canes is gonna make sure he ushers Christmas in with a blood and body parts instead of milk and cookies."

Vlad frowned at this comment, seeming rather puzzled by it. Cassie didn't understand what was the part that was difficult for him to comprehend until he asked, "Hunhhâ€œ do you think that the Santa eats the little children?"

Cassie couldn't suppress a dark snicker at this one as she shook her head. "No, Vlad, it's not a Jeffery Dhamer slasher we're dealing with here, it's pretty much a regular, boring old kill-and-run."

Her own comment caused her too to frown, however, disturbed by the idea of it. "Shit, if there's ever a Jeffery Dhamer slasher, though, that might be one I call in sick on."

Vlad, who she was sure didn't have a clue who Dhamer was, nodded thoughtfully, again, as he so often did, taking her at her literal word. "Hurrrâ€œ if we ever find a Jeffery Bomber slasher, Cassandraâ€œ I will tell others that you are sick. And I will do the job while you are home in bed."

Shifting her eyes towards Vlad, Cassie tried but did not entirely succeed to hide the smile that his comment brought to her face. Vlad could be so earnest and sweet that she often did not know how to take his comments and actions towards her. With any other man, hell, any woman either, she could easily shrug it off or outright rebuff it. She could tell herself that they wanted to get in her pants or try to sway her to doing whatever it was they wanted out of her, or she could tell herself that they were going to betray her down the line or be hurt because of her. She could tell herself that it was better for them both if she never let them get even a little bit closer to her, if she cut them off right away and never let anyone show her even the smallest amount of kindness or understanding. And she did, on a regular and wearying basis.

But Cassie couldn't do that with Vlad, couldn't hurt him deliberately, without feeling like she was the most hideous being on the face of the planet. He was the one person who it was safe to let close, to let herself be seen as any less than a stone cold, heartless bitch who never faltered, never loved, and certainly never broke down and cried over the mess of her life. And it just figured that the one person she was safe with just happened to be so alone himself that she was the only person who would accept him.

"Thanks, Vlad," was all she said, for she had learned long ago that explaining her flippant comments and sarcastic remarks to Vlad often

took too long for them to have any impact by the time he understood.

Sighing with impatient restlessness, she stretched her arms in front of her, then flipped the handle of her baseball bat from one hand to the other, glancing towards the back exit of the mall again before looking up at Vlad.

"Well, I'd suggest I Spy, but since all we'd really see is you, me, building, and blackness, it would be a pretty boring round of "guess which of the four objects here is the one I'm seeing-""

She had not finished her sentence before the back entrance doorway finally opened, and out came two figures, walking with rapid, purposeful strides. Even in the darkness Cassie could see that it was an adult and a child, the adult dragging the child, a little girl maybe seven years old, with red braids and a red velvet dress, by her hand so that the child had to almost run to keep up. The adult was not simply an adult, she saw, but also a SANTA adult, dressed in those cheap red velvet suits like the Santas that worked inside the shopping mall, complete with black boots, red hat, and beard. Cassie couldn't tell from the distance if the beard was fake or not, but that hardly mattered. From the impatient stride of his walk, the way he was disappearing into the darkest shadows of the back of the mall, and the fact that he was there with a child at all, that told her all she really needed to know.

This guy was her slasher. Why hadn't she guessed that he would, of course, also be Santa Claus?

"That's our guy," she called to Vlad, and not a moment too soon.

It appeared that the slasher-Santa was too intent on his acquired new victim to even notice Cassie and Vlad ten feet away from him, which was not an easy sight to miss between Cassie's raised baseball bat and Vlad's hulking form. She supposed anticipation over impending mutilations was apt to make one a bit hard of hearing, and nearsighted too. The slasher-Santa pulled the little girl close to him, one arm around her shoulders as he beamed down at her, as if in a friendly, Santa fashion. The child's eyes glowed as she looked up at him, soaking up the apparent affection with such delight that somewhere in the back of her mind Cassie made note of her own observation that the kid would be spending thousands in therapy bills shortly after this night. But of more prominent concern by far to her was that while one arm circled the child's shoulders, the other was drawing up high behind the child's back, clutching a sharp dagger in one black-gloved hand.

"Knife!" was Cassie's shouted warning to Vlad, and she ran towards the two, baseball bat held in a batter's pose just before she drove it home, directly into the slasher-Santa's spine. She heard a loud cracking noise as something in the spine broke, and Vlad lumbered close behind her, ready to protect if need be as Cassie swung again.

The slasher-Santa turned as fast as a broken spine and a pillow-stuffed belly would allow, letting out bellow that sounded distinctly un-jolly. His face was flushed with rage, but his eyes were dark, almost black, and even the full white beard could not hide the malicious grin that appeared as he turned to regard Cassie.

"Ho ho ho! naughty," he hissed, and Cassie's eyebrows drew together.

"Who the hell are YOU calling a ho? I'm a fucking virgin, Lardass, short skirts and fishnets don't a ho make!"

The slasher-Santa seized her bat even as she swung it again with surprising speed, pulling Cassie in close to him as the other managed to maintain firm grip of his knife.

Normally, this would not have been a huge issue for her, because Vlad was right behind her, more than ready and willing to defend this "little one." But this time around, it was not the slasher so much as the victim who was the problem. For the little girl he had been intent upon brutally, well, slashing, was hardly cooperative and grateful for their appearance and their valiant attempts to save her life. In fact, she was rather horrified, even infuriated.

"YOU LEAVE SANTA ALONE! STOP HURTING SANTA CLAUS!" she shrieked, and punctuated this statement with a swift kick to the back of Cassie's knees. As Cassie's legs buckled, surprisingly affected by the little girl's determined strength and rage put behind that kick, then wobbled in the high heeled boots that had admittedly probably been a bad idea to wear for this particular occasion, the little girl took this as an opportunity to kick her again, then launched herself onto her back.

"YOU LEAVE SANTA CLAUS ALONE!"

"Okay, kid, YOU need a fucking time out!" Cassie sputtered through gritted teeth, as she concentrated fiercely on wresting her bat out of the slasher-Santa's hands, trying to recover from her pain and momentary near loss of balance enough to kick him somewhere in the groin area, all this made more difficult because the kid was now clinging to her back like a freakin' possum baby. "Let me clue you in on a few thingsâ€|first off, Santa carries toys, not knives. Second offâ€|Santaâ€|isn'tâ€|REAL!"

She managed to wrest her bat free then and drove its fattest end into the Santa-slasher's crotch, gaining vicious satisfaction when he doubled over again.

"HO HO HO! NAUGHTYâ€|YOU WILL BE PUNISHED!" the slasher-Santa shrieked, and even bent over he began to stagger towards her again, slashing out wildly with his dagger.

The child on her back howled in rage, then actually sank her teeth into Cassie's shoulder. One thing Cassie could be thankful for with that- the plastic jacket had to taste like shit to her, and if it wasn't good for keeping out the cold, it was good for protecting against child bites.

"Little help, Vlad!" she called, trying to shake the kid off, but Vlad was already acting.

Scooping the child off of Cassie and holding her under one arm, where she kicked and screamed and beat at his thick skin ineffectively, he strode up to the Santa-slasher, who was even now getting to his feet and coming at Cassie. With one grasp of the smaller figure's chin in

one powerful palm, Vlad jerked his head to the side, neatly breaking his neck. Releasing him and watching as he fell to the floor, still easily holding the now howling child beneath his other arm, Vlad looked over to the slightly panting Cassie, his brow furrowing in puzzlement.

"Hurr...I do not understand, Cassandra. Why did he call you after a garden rake?"

And when Cassie stared at him blankly, then understood after a few moments what it was that was so confusing him, she burst out laughing, even as the child continued to rail and shriek against them furiously.

"YOU HURT SANTA CLAUS! YOU KILLED SANTA CLAUS! I hate you, I hate you!"

She hit at Vlad again, which was probably hurting her own fists considerably more than Vlad's, but nevertheless Vlad looked down at her with concern, his forehead creasing as he then looked to Cassie, as if asking her how to respond to the child's anger.

"Hurrâ€|she is so littleâ€|I do not want to hurt her," he said to Cassie, which did nothing to deter the child's fury.

"I hate you, I hate you both! You're a witch," she shrieked at Cassie, pointing to her with one flailing hand, "and YOU, you're a MONSTER!"

This last shot, directed at Vlad, was what pushed Cassie over the edge from faint amusement to anger. Striding up to where the child still hung under Vlad's arm, she held her baseball bat high in one hand, knocking her other hand against it in a slow, somewhat sinister fashion, as though she were considering taking a swing again. The child stopped talking immediately as she approached, as though rethinking the wisdom of pissing her off with her standing so close with such an obvious weapon in hand. Cassie raised an eyebrow, and though her voice was pleasant when she spoke to the child, there was clearly a dangerous undertone to it as well.

It was one thing to yell at her and call her a witch. That was nothing that she wasn't used to. But calling Vlad a monster, THAT was something she just wouldn't take. Even from a little kid who'd almost been Santa's newest carnage.

"Hey, you," she said deliberately, eyes boring into the upside down child's. "You see my friend here? The one you're hitting and kicking and trying to bite? You better watch yourself, young lady, because he's the new Santa Claus."

The child's eyes widened, and she twisted her neck to look up at Vlad doubtfully, though she had not resumed her fighting against him. Seeing that she had her attention, Cassie stepped closer, still slowly hitting her hand against the end of her bat.

"Yeah, that's right. The old Santa was naughty, and what do you think happens to naughty Santas who aren't good to girls and boys, huh?"

The little girl seems to be processing this as she swallows, taking a

shuddery breath. "Heâ€|he wasâ€| "

"Naughty, yep," Cassie confirmed with a nod, relieved that the kid did seem to be listening. "That's what happens to naughty kids too. Forget the lump of coal crap, this is the real deal, kid, see for yourself. This is the NEW Santa, a nice one. The beard got itchy and he doesn't like red, so he's changing the image up. You want Santa to think you're nice and not naughty, you better stop hitting him, don't you think?"

"Sorry, Santa," the little girl whispered as she looked up at Vlad now with awe approaching fear in her gaze, and one small hand hesitantly reached out to touch his side, as though in continued apology. A small smile curved Vlad's lips as he responded.

"Hurrâ€|that is okay, little one."

"Who are you?" the little girl asked Cassie with renewed respect, eyeing her too with caution now.

"I'm Santa's helper," Cassie said without a moment's pause, leaning in close to the child as she let her tone remain just short of threatening. "I watch all the little girls and boys when he's too busy and I let him know who's naughty and needs to be taken care of. Soâ€|if you want me to tell Santa here how nice you've beenâ€|you need to go back into the mall, straight to the cop station by the food court, and tell them what happened and to help you find your mom. Got it?"

"My mom's in Florida," the little girl said with some confusion, but Cassie waved a dismissive hand, rolling her eyes.

"Well, you know who I mean. Hurry up and go, though, Santa's helper here isn't getting impatient."

She gestured for Vlad to set her down, and the girl wasted no time tearing towards the back entrance of the mall and back inside it, no doubt almost bowling people over in her haste to get to the police station. As Cassie turned back to Vlad, she was surprised to see that he was smiling.

"She was not afraidâ€|when she thought that I was the Santa."

"Guess we know what job to sign you up for next year, huh?" she smiled, only half kidding. "Wear a beard and a hat and we've got a way to pay for motel rooms and gas for another few monthsâ€|.remind me of that next December, if we're both still aliveâ€|"

3. Chapter 3

They sprung for a motel room that night, rather than sleeping in the floorboard of the back of Cassie's van. It was Christmas Eve, after all, and she figured they both deserved a real bed after the last slasher-slaying. Once they had gotten themselves settled in for the night, Cassie brought out her laptop and started to look up any possible contenders for the slasher-Santa's identity pre-Slasher-status, based off the location and recent deaths in the area. It didn't take very long for her to find the right guy.

"Carl Peters, age 39, died December 15," she announced to Vlad, who looked up from his bed across the room, cocking his head. "Well, THIS explains a lotâ€|he was a mall Santa, accused of feeling up one too many kiddies. One of the kids spilled the beans, and old Carl goes to the slammerâ€|apparently someone "accidentally" stuck him in with general population and he got a shaft to the kidney. And from then on, slasher city, I guess."

She exhaled, her jaw tightening as she clicked off of the screen and shut her laptop abruptly. "If I'd known he was a fuckin' pedo I would have beat him around a lot more before I let you finish him off."

"Pedo?" Vlad frowned, and Cassie slid her eyes over to him, debating. It was moments like this that she struggled between her desire to help Vlad maintain the innocence that was such a big part of who he was, and whether to help him to learn and understand more about the world.

It was Christmas Eve today, though, and being kind and vague won out over blunt information giving.

"Guys who like to hurt kids. That's what he was."

"Ohâ€|hurrr," Vlad mused thoughtfully, but there must have been a lingering anger or perhaps something more poignant in Cassie's expression, something like sadness or grief, because he reached across the small space between their beds and gently lay a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"Cassandraâ€|when you were a little girlâ€|did anyone ever hurt you?"

Cassie's lips pressed together as she thought about the other children, the ones who had pushed her down and called her names, laughed at her and sneered at her for her dirty hair and glasses, her threadworn clothing and her mother's job as the school cafeteria lady. She thought about her mother staring out the window, waiting for her father to return, about her mother's tears, the blood covering the front of her apron just before the police broke inâ€|she thought about this all, and yet she shook her head slowly.

"No, Vlad. Not like that."

Vlad did not remove his hand from her shoulder, and though Cassie didn't look at him, she knew he was watching her, that he could sense her sudden melancholy, even if he did not call her bluff.

"I would not have let anyone hurt you, Cassandra."

Something about the sincerity of his tone, of knowing that he meant it with all his heart, was enough to make Cassie's lips twitch into a slight smile, and she nodded, reaching back to briefly cover Vlad's hand with her own.

"I know, Vlad. I know."

For a few moments they are silent, touching, and then Vlad gently pulls away, getting to his feet with a loud clearing of his throat,

before squatting awkwardly beside the bed, pulling out from one side of it a very suspicious shopping bag. Already knowing and dreading what was coming, Cassie sat up straight, shaking her head even before he could explain himself.

"Oh no, Vlad, tell me you didn't get me anything!"

"It is Christmas," Vlad said with some surprise, as if he could think of no other option than to get her something, and as he held out the bag to her, Cassie bit the inside of her cheeks briefly, her face flushing with embarrassment and guilt both.

"Vlad, look—"

"Open, please, Cassandra?" he asked, then simply deposited the bag in her lap when she didn't take it from him. There seemed little option except to do as he directed, and as Cassie reluctantly stuck her hand inside the bag, she pulled out a simple light blue dress with a delicate floral pattern.

This was so unlike her usual clothing choice of black, short, and black that she stared, then looked up at Vlad, momentarily startled enough to want only an explanation. Vlad smiled slightly and shrugged, attempting to provide one.

"Hurrâ€|I thoughtâ€|it is prettyâ€|.would make you look nice."

This simple reasoning was enough that Cassie knew even if it made her look completely stupid, even if she hated it, she was going to have to where this damn thingâ€|because Vlad would think she looked nice. It also didn't do much to lessen her guilt.

"Vladâ€|I'm sorry," she started awkwardly, holding the dress out from herself and staring at it rather than at him. "I didn't think we were doing anything for Christmasâ€|I didn't get you anything."

But Vlad waved a hand at her as though to dismiss her concerns, smiling slightly. "It is okay, Cassandra. I do not mind. It is still Christmas, and I am here with you and we are okay. So I am happy, yes? I do not need a present."

Cassie looked down at the dress in her hands, thinking of her mother, of the brave smile she had put on for her as she sat before her few wrapped gifts, of the look almost like pride that was so seldom in her mother's eyes as Cassie too smiled. She thought of her mother, but then she looked up into Vlad's eyes and let her lips curve into a small returning smile for him.

"Yeah, that's what matters," she said softly, and at least for then, it was. "Soâ€|you want me to try this on?"

The end

End
file.